

# St. Pete woman takes Hadassah walking program to heart

By BOB FRYER  
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An amazing thing happened to Linda Weiss on her walk to the [Western Wall](#).

Weiss, a grandmother of three, has long been an avid walker, often taking the stairs instead of the elevator as she comes and goes from her downtown [St. Petersburg](#) residence.

Last year Weiss decided to participate in Hadassah's "Every Step Counts" challenge to promote heart health. It is a cause she is personally connected to, as her mother and 10 of her mother's 11 siblings all died of heart disease.

There are different levels of difficulty for participants in the Every Step challenge and Weiss chose the most difficult – to walk at least 12,000 steps per day for nearly six months. In doing so, she would be making the equivalent of the distance between Hadassah headquarters in [New York City](#) to the [Hadassah Medical Organization](#) in [Jerusalem](#) – which Hadassah calculated would require her to take 2,171,000 steps or a little more than 2,000 miles.

Not too long after beginning the walking challenge on April 1, 2015, Weiss received an invitation to a friend's wedding in [Israel](#).

"I recalculated and figured if I push my pace up by 5,000 more steps per day, I can reach the goal while in Jerusalem," Weiss said.

In Israel she visited the graves of her grandparents on the Mount of Olives on June 28 and her Fitbit showed she was a little shy of the goal. Later that day she and a friend walked through Jerusalem to the Western Wall. She checked her step count at the Wall and found she had surpassed the goal, giving her one more thing to celebrate when she attended her friend's wedding the next day.

Weiss didn't stop there. She kept walking, logging 4,045,925 steps by the end of the challenge on Sept. 27. That made her the top walker for the entire Hadassah program that included more than 1,000 women who logged more than 350,000 miles. Of the participants, 413 wound up walking the virtual distance to Jerusalem.

Weiss moved to [Florida](#) in 1970, living mostly in [Palm Beach Gardens](#), then moved to St. Petersburg in 2013 to be close to her daughter and grandchildren. She is a member of [Congregation B'nai Israel](#) and Chabad of St. Petersburg. Like her mother before her, Weiss and daughter Rachel Wein are lifetime members of Hadassah.

“I started walking about 30 years ago for exercise, enjoyment and weight control,” she said.

She mostly walked on a treadmill before moving to St. Petersburg. Now she also enjoys walking along the downtown waterfront and inside her building’s four-story garage, where “you get the cross breezes without the sun and you have inclines and declines.”

Though she does not mind taking a hike on a trail now and then, since she works from her home, she does most of her walking on ventures to and from her home or even in her home while on the phone.

She mostly walks alone, she said, but has also gone on walks with [Bonnie Stein](#), a fellow Hadassah lifetime member and a race walker who sometimes trains others.

Weiss is 67 and said since she turned 60, she has participated in three half-marathons in St. Petersburg, walking at a pace of about 4 miles per hour. To her, the goal is not to win those events, but to finish.

Weiss says she is well traveled and often when visiting cities she will eschew taxis and walk. “It allows you to get to know the city and experience it more,” she said.

This year’s Every Step Counts competition is a virtual walk from Jerusalem to [Atlanta](#), where Hadassah will hold its annual national meeting this summer. The competition runs from April 11 to July 21 and the goal is 1,227,874 steps. Weiss has already logged more than 1,300,000 steps and will continue walking until the competition ends.

### **[Heart Health](#) education**

Hadassah started its Heart Health program in 2013 with an Every [Beat Counts](#) theme and events “to educate and empower women about the unique risks of heart attacks and to help them reduce those risks,” said Eliana Nelson, manager of Hadassah’s Health and Wellness Division and head of the Every Step County program.

“Heart disease is the number one killer of women in this country, but 82 percent of it is preventable and education is a vital component of that prevention,” said Ellen Hershkin, national president of Hadassah.

Nelson said education is important because heart attack symptoms for women are different from men. Women experience a tingling in the neck, back pain, jaw pain, chest pains that are not sharp but feel like indigestion, or the sudden onset of fatigue, and often just think they are normal aches and pains and do not rush for help, she said.

Nelson’s volunteer counterpart at Hadassah, Linda Hakerem, added, “Women call 911 an average of one hour later than men when having a heart attack.”

One of the educational components about women’s heart disease was the need for women to be more active. From that sprang the Every Step Counts challenge last year.

“We know personally from stories we heard from women who were educated under the Heart Health program that lives have been saved by the program,” Nelson said.

This year fewer steps are required to meet the goal of a virtual walk from Jerusalem to Atlanta, but already, thanks to Walkertracker software that gives real-time updates on the progress of more than 1,000 walkers, Nelson and Hakerem know the average number of steps taken by participants this year is higher than last year. The software also allows those with a Fitbit or a variety of phone apps to input their activity from other forms of exercise such as a Zumba class, swimming or biking, and have that information converted into “steps walked.” It also shows where participants are along the route of the virtual walk from Jerusalem to Atlanta.

Nelson said since the Heart Health program began it has reached more than 12,000 women.